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ABSTRACT

Problems of bridging the gap between theory and practice in the professional preparation of student affairs practitioners are considered. After briefly discussing the character of professional work and the role of theory and research, attention is directed to problems inherent to the nature of applied educational fields and issues related to the imperfect correspondence between theory and practice. Strategies are recommended concerning professional preparation and successfully connecting theory and practice in the course of graduate education. While many of the examples are specific to student affairs, the assumptions and general processes outlined are presumed to be applicable to the task of applied professional preparation in general. The suggestions for professional preparation include: encourage the role of "personal theorist;" move from the concrete to the abstract, from practice to theory; and move from the abstract to the concrete, from theory to practice. It is suggested that the best place to present theory is with the concrete experience of students, and that inductive methods that move from particulars to general principles are more effective. Strategies to move from the abstract to the concrete might include using a particular theoretical model to critique current campus policies or practices. Included are 15 references. (SW)

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Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice in Student Affairs Professional Preparation

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Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice in Student Affairs Professional Preparation

Introduction and Overview

This presentation focuses on problems of bridging the gap between theory and practice in the professional preparation of student affairs practitioners. It begins with a brief statement about the character of professional work and the role of theory and research in guiding it. Problems inherent to the nature of applied educational fields are then identified and issues related to the imperfect correspondence between theory and practice are discussed. Finally, several strategies are recommended to those involved in professional preparation for successfully connecting theory to practice in the course of graduate education. While many of the examples and illustrations drawn here are specific to student affairs, the assumptions and general processes outlined are presumed to be applicable to the task of applied professional preparation in general.

What Professionals Do

"We make a difference or your money back !," the sign says in bold letters. "Call the professionals," an advertisement reads; "choose the experts," another one suggests; "skilled...certified...approved...accredited," red banner lines jumping from the Yellow Pages. All are claims of comfort we have come to rely upon in a consumer-oriented society, in effect, promises of quality we expect from the person who changes the oil in our car to the individual who invests and manages our life savings. Attention to those assumed "to know" is more than good business or common sense though. In a world whose complexity far exceeds the boundaries of individual grasp or conception, it's a matter of survival.

Whatever the field or concern, it is characteristic of modern society, more so today than ever before, to depend heavily upon, and indeed value, the input of those who are professionals at what they do.

What's the meaning of "being a professional" ? By contrast, how does that differ from being just an amateur ? The thesis proposed here is that professionals do make a difference and they are clearly distinguished from non-professionals in reference to five criteria. Unlike amateurs, professionals can:

1. Offer a reasonable and believable explanation for the phenomenon (a) they purport to address.

2. Support the validity of their explanation with evidence.

3. Respond to that phenomenon (a) on the basis of their explanation, and do so with generally accepted and standardized methods.

4. Demonstrate the success of their efforts with evidence.

5. Articulate a clear sense of what is important and valuable in reference to the phenomenon (a) they address.

Each of these criteria addresses an important component or tool of the professional-at-work. Explanations derive from <u>theory</u>, validity is supported through <u>research</u>, action flows and is governed by standards of <u>practice</u>, and consequences are documented through <u>evaluation</u>. Above all, the <u>value</u> of the phenomenon addressed is expressed through personal choice and commitment.

Perhaps the quickest way to illustrate these points is to refer to a familiar archtype professional-at-work, the family physician. At one time or another each of us has had the experience of limping off to the doctor with a host of unpleasant symptoms, looking for some relief or, at the very least, a reasonable explanation for our private misery. Our choice of the doctor is obvious. First of all we assume that, by virtue of her professional preparation and training, she will see the connection between each of our symptoms and, drawing upon her knowledge of virology and bacteriology (i.e., theories), she will be able to identify the probable cause of our illness. Second, we may further assume that she has kept up with the latest issues of the New England Journal of Medicine and is abreast of the recent developments in this area, particulary the current endemic strains of virus (research). Third, we expect her to treat our illness based on an appropriate diagnosis and consistent with the accepted standards of practice, e.g., bacterial infections warrant an effective antibiotic, but viral infections must run the course with symptomatic relief when possible (practice). Finally, we do expect to feel better, and if not, we are likely to go back for another explanation to the same or even a different doctor (evaluation). At the core of this process is our assumption that this physician clearly values good health and holds it as a goal of her professional efforts (values).

Student Affairs Practitioners as Professionals

Student affairs practitioners (or "student development educators" as some prefer) are also professionals-at-work. The goal of student development, that is, the power and promise of formal education in mediating the life transitions and development of individual participants,

constitutes the core of the profession's commitment (value). The Dean of Student Affairs, encountering the case of a student considering dropping out of school during the first semester of the freshman year, may draw from a reservoir of knowledge about the developmental status of freshman students and the differential impact of various educational environments. The student's comments of "being confused about what to do with my life and what to major in," and about "not feeling that I belong" might quickly invoke the conceptions of Chickering (1969) on developing purpose and identity, and the involvement model of Astin (1984) underscoring the importance of a student's connection to the activities and structures of the institution. Perhaps the student's dependent manner, in deference to the Dean as an "authority who knows the answer", may also lead to conclusions about this student's developmental level, in this case perhaps dualistic (Perry, 1970) or dependent/conforming (Harvey, Hunt, & Schroder, 1961). All of these explanations (theories) are useful for understanding this student's behavior and for anticipating her potential reaction, such as whether or not she will stay in college. Furthermore, there is ample evidence in the attrition/retention literature (research) to suggest that this student, given her present characteristics and status, is indeed a high risk candidate for dropping out of school.

With the goal of student development in mind, and based upon the above explanations, several prescriptions might be warranted (practice): (1) advise the student to enroll in a Career Decision Making class offered on campus, (2) suggest that she join a student organization or group compatible with her interests, and (3) encourage more risk-taking on her part, supporting her attempts at self-reliance and judgment making. Following up on her experience and progress with these recommendations (evaluation) may confirm the validity of the Dean's response and may suggest additional changes in policies and practices affecting other

students like her in a more proactive, systematic manner (e.g., requiring students to complete an intital career planning assessment session as part of orientation to the freshman year). The point of this illustration is that theory, research, practice, and evaluation are integral components of a student affairs practitioner's professional response. Failure to effect a linkage between these components may yield a less than adequate explanation, unreasonable expectations, and ineffective practice.

Theory and Practice in Applied Fields

Lewin (1936) asserted, "there is nothing so practical as a good theory," and Cross (1981) contends that "practice without theory is blind." Both claims affirm the importance of a field's theory/research base, and its linkage to practice, as essential for professional effectiveness. Yet the linkage between theory and practice, and the incorporation of a theory/research base in the professional preparation of practitioners is, in itself, problematic for several reasons. These are: (1) the inherently imperfect correspondence between theory and reality; (2) the difficulties of translating theory to practice; (3) the nature of applied fields; and (4) the nature of individuals attracted to people-oriented, applied fields.

Simply stated, theory is a believable explanation for reality; it serves to organize and delineate the relationships between facts. A theoretical concept or model is derived from an abstraction of a potentially infinite number of specific and concrete variations. For example, the infinitely complex variations in the way students learn have been described by Kolb (1984) in terms of four abstracted patterns: divergence, assimilation, convergence, and accomodation. No one individual can be completely captured by any one of these patterns or styles, yet the presence of each of these is clearly evident in a given population. In that sense, theory can

never be an accurate description of any specific reality, but only an approximate representation of many.

The difficulties of translating theory into practice in student affairs have been addressed succinctly by Parker (1977). He states that such a task presents a dilemma to theorists and practitioners alike, that it is, in fact, paradoxical, and that it is therefore problematic. The dilemma, according to Parker is that:

> "In order for us to create a researchable model of the person [i.e., a theory] we must abstract from a very complex wholeness those parts which we wish to study. When we do so we ignore the rest of the person, which is interrelated in a complex and systemic way....Workable models are too complex to research and researchable models are too simplified to be useful in practice (p. 420)."

The paradox Parker identifies is that, although "the nature of theory is such that it does not lead directly to practice,...the nature of practice is such that it does not proceed without theory," in his words, "some fairly set ideas about what is important, how those elements are related to each other, and what should happen (p. 420)." To understand the paradox, he draws the distinction between formal theory and informal "theories in use" (Argyris, 1976). Formal theories comprise:

> "explicit conceptualization[s] of the essential elements of a particular phenomenon, the hypothesized relationships among those elements, and the procedures by which those relations may be validated. Such theories are shared in the scientific community and tested in the laboratory or in natural settings."

Informal theory refers to the "body of common knowledge that allows us to make implicit connections among the events and persons in our environment and upon which we act in everyday life" (Parker, 1977, p. 420). Parker suggests that,

> "It is precisely because of our tendency to not self-correct that we cannot rely soley on our informal theories. Formal theories and their validation are crucial as counterforces to our highly personal world. It is the process of formal theory building and testing that corrects and adds to the body of knowledge common to a group or a culture, in our particular case, the group pf professionals who work in student affairs" (p. 420).

Parker's solution is to recognize the problem of learning how to translate formal theories into informal theories in action, in effect, using them (formal theories) to "tune our ears" and to adapt "to the needs of individual students (reading and flexing) through understanding the ways they personally construe their life and environs." (1977, p. 424).

The problem of linking theory to practice, it is hypothesized, is also a function of the nature of applied fields and the types of individuals attracted to them. Success in an applied field tends to be guaged in terms of what an individual has done. Accomplishments accumulated over time lead to a "track record" which, in turn, becomes the mark of an experienced and "seasoned practitioner." Individuals must "pay their dues" as an apprentice, learning from those who have "been there." Advancement is contingent upon a succession of responsibilites and assignments. Basic knowledge (such as theory), acquired through traditional schooling, is both a source of mistrust and perhaps even a threat to those already practicing in the field. It is a source of mistrust for several reasons. Claims of expertise, grounded in "what you know" rather than " whatyou have done," will always be met with suspicion in an applied field. This is especially true of a field like student affairs where the organization of and interaction with people is paramount. Nothing substitutes for experience and maturity in terms of learning about and responding to the complexities

of human behavior. Consequently, a status claim based upon "what you know" (e.g., knowledge of current theory) rather than "what you have done" is understandably threatening because it tends to undercut the experiential foundation of an applied field. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the already imperfect relationship between theory and practice, and the debate sharpens particularly at a time when the theory/research base of the field is expanding rapidly (such as is happening now in student affairs). It's difficult to find time to stay current with all the new developments in the literature, and unfortunately, support for continuing education and professional development opportunities is too often seen as a luxury item and the first to go when budgets get tight. Theory and practice are continually juxtaposed in an applied field and the tension created by this dynamic is inevitable.

Assumptions about the nature of applied fields are also important in understanding the type of individuals attracted to them. The notion that different occupational settings create characteristic environments that, in turn, differentially attract individuals to them is not a new idea. Holland (1973) has written extensively on this topic and claims that environments select and shape the behavior of people within them, in effect, homogenizing them over time in a coercive manner. Those who more closely resemble the dominant type within an environment are most likely to be attracted to it, and once within, more satisfied and stable. A host of other studies examining differences in psychological type (Provost & Anchors, 1987), cognitive style (Messick & Associates, 1976), and learning style (Kolb, 1984), all lend additional support to the validity of this notion of person-environment congruence. An implication of this for the present discussion is that individuals attracted to a people-oriented applied field, like student affairs, may simply not value a theory/research base, since they are essentially "doers." In the parlance of Myers-Briggs,

they may be "extraverts," "sensors," "feelers," and "judgers," each with its respective aversion to abstract, logical prescriptions. From Witkin's (1976) vantage point they tend to be "field dependent," seeing the whole rather than the parts, and according to Kolb (1984) many may be "accomodators," with a preference for active experimentation and concrete experience as principal modes of learning. Furthermore, Holland (1973) might describe them as "social," "enterprising," and "artistic," deriving occupational satisfaction from people rather than data, ideas, or things. The point of this analysis is that student affairs may attract individuals, particularly at the master's level, who are neither interested in nor particularly adept at the manipulation of concepts and ideas, and who may, in fact, actively resist the infusion of a theory/research base into any requirements for professional preparation.

Connecting Theory to Practice in Professional Preparation

The following recommendations are offered for addressing the treatment of theory in the graduate preparation of professional practitioners. They are derived both from formal theory and ten years of my own accumulated informal "theories in use" as a graduate faculty member. They are offered not as a solution to the above problems, but as an adaptation to where students are. The importance of a theory/research base for professional practice is not compromised, however the inherent difficulty of transmitting such a value is acknowledged. There are three basic strategies.

(1) <u>Encourage the role of "personal theorist"</u>

This strategy recognizes that theory-building is a very natural activity for practitioners. To wonder how something functions or why

something worked well (or didn't work) is a normal step in the day-to-day decisions a practitioner must make. Encourage this role by having students first focus on identifying their informal "theories in use." Within the context of a course on Theory and Assessment of College Student Development, for example, appropriate activities might include addressing basic questions like, "Do college students change over the course of their undergraduate years?", "In what ways?", and "To what can you attribute such changes?" There's an inevitable period of struggle in addressing such questions since informal theories are never quite clear and are invariably difficult to articulate. Group discussions that focus on synthesizing disparate "hunches" and developing a consensual framework (e.g., a descriptive model of the changes that take place among students during the college years) seem to work best. It's important to do this before any formal theories are introduced though. Articulation and ownership of a personally-generated explanation is important for the initiation of the "personal theorist" role. This also represents a critical step in recognizing the need for a more adequately articulated and supported perspective (formal theory). My own experience over the years suggests that, collectively, a group of students will generate an informal theory model, in response to the above task, very close to what they will later come to know as a formal theory anyway. That itself is an affirming process for them.

(2) Move from the concrete to the abstract, from practice to theory

This recommendation recognizes that formal theory rarely introduces a completely new idea, but rather it more often helps better organize and articulate what we intuitively know or have already observed. For example, each of us have had the experience of interacting with an individual who approaches issues from an absolute, authoritarian, simplistic, and black and white perspective. The concept of Dualism, as

described by Perry (1970), is immediately recognizable and it helps us identify more clearly the nature of that pattern of thinking, as well as its sequence in an overall scheme of development (in this case, a requisite step to Multiplicity and Relativism). Good theories allow us to incorporate extant knowledge. This is why the best theories seem to be almost self-evident, as if anyone could have developed them.

The best place to start then in presenting theory is with the concrete experience of students. Inductive methods, where the task is to move from particulars to general principles, are most effective. For example, guiding students through an actual moral dilemma, having them synthesize and organize the various choices and responses, builds an important informal theory base that will leave them much more receptive to the formal stages of moral reasoning identified by Kohlberg (1969). The use of case studies, focusing on the development of an explanantion for individual differences (e.g., how two students responded differently to the same class, or editorial), is another effective technique.

(3) Move from the abstract to the concrete, from theory to practice

At first glance this appears to contradict the recommendation above. However it is offered as a suggestion for completing the learning cycle. Going from the particular to the general, from the concrete to the abstract, from practice to theory, is best for the initial acquisition of concepts. To fully understand the concepts though, the process must be reversed, moving from the general to the particular, from the abstract to the concrete, and from theory back to practice. The sequence and importance of this cycle of learning has been addressed in greater detail by Kolb (1984). Kolb describes a learning model in terms of four sequential points on a cycle, beginning with concrete experience, leading to reflective observation, followed by abstract

conceptualization, and then active experimentation. A quick reference to my favorite childhood television show, "Mr. Wizard," makes the model easy to remember. The classic scene begins with a curious member of the neighborhood in Mr. Wizard's kitchen-laboratory being asked to "try something out" (concrete experience). A flash of excitement passes (sometimes literally!) and Mr. Wizard challenges the naive participant to think about what happened (reflective observation). Following a brief moment of disonance, Mr. Wizard comes to the rescue with a succint description of the underlying principles to the event (abstract conceptualization). Now prepared to understand what is likely to happen in this situation, or even a variation thereof, the participant is challenged to "try it again" (active experimentation), and th cycle is complete.

Strategies that capitalize on the last two steps of this cycle (i.e., moving from the abstract to the concrete) might include using a particular theoretical model to critique current campus policies or practices, or generating a program intervention designed to stimulate developmental growth. The focus of such a task should be on examining the implications inherent in the way a particular theory explains the phenomenon it puports to address. For example, developmental differences identified by Conceptual Systems theory (Harvey, Hunt, & Schroder, 1961) imply that a "depending-conforming" individual requires more environmental structure for growth than one who is "independent-self reliant". How can those structural differences be reflected in the way a class is taught? In a counseling/advising approach? In terms of critiquing policies or practices, examination of the way in which roommates are assigned, or career counseling services delivered, might be interesting in light of a typology model like the Myers-Briggs (Myers, 1980). Too many times theory is presented only as a revealed, abstract conceptualization, bearing little or no resemblance to the reality that initially generated it.

Starting from the concrete, moving to the abstract, and then going back to the concrete can bridge the critical gap between theory and practice; and these strategies are applicable to any phase of professional preparation, from an entry level degree program to opportunities for continuing education and staff development.

In summary, the relationship between theory and practice in an applied field is not a problem to be solved, it's an issue to be managed. The preparation of practitioners who can go beyond the present generation's experience and respond in more creative ways to the future depends on it.

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